# *Presentations in Everyday Life*: Linking Audience Interest and Speaker Eloquence

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Every few years, a journal article appears that reorients the world of communication scholars, teachers, and practitioners. Todd Frobish's "Jamieson Meets Lucas" article in Communication Education (July 2000) is such an article. Many of us who teach and/or write about public speaking read this article with great interest and some trepidation. For our part, John Daly and I were delighted with the article because it validated our approach to *Presentations in Everyday Life*. Thus, I welcome this opportunity to discuss our textbook.

When John and I set about writing a "public speaking" textbook, we made three preliminary decisions that broke with more traditional approaches. We would (1) shape the content of our textbook based on the results of a survey of real-world speakers, (2) focus on presentations rather than public speaking, and (3) include significantly more communication theory and research than is found in most other public speaking textbooks.

## The Survey

With the help of our publisher, Houghton Mifflin, we conducted a national survey asking people in a variety of professions (e.g., corporate executives, business owners, teachers, medical practitioners, government employees) to tell us what was most important (and not important) to them when preparing and delivering a speech or presentation. Although predictable skills such as organizing a presentation and adapting to an audience received high ratings, the top-ranked skill was something of a surprise: Keeping your audience interested. Not far behind was Choosing appropriate and effective words. Our wise, real-world speakers reinforced Jamieson's contention that we must find new ways to meld the old virtues of our discipline with the demands of an audience, seeking a new eloquence in an electronic age.

To address the challenge of "keeping your audience interested," we include a unique, pivotal chapter titled "Generating Interest." Specifically, we focus on the effective use of language, narrative, humor, and audience participation. Although we do not confine our discussion of these topics to this one chapter, we emphasize their significance and the skills needed to use them as effective strategies in a presentation. We go beyond what to do and focus on how to do it.

## Presentation Speaking

Our second major decision was to use the term presentation speaking rather than public speaking--even in the book's title. As we see it, presentation speaking is the broader term. Our students rarely give public speeches. They do, however, make many presentations (in classes, at work, at community and family events) that have the potential to be interesting and eloquent. Narratives, personal disclosure, emotional appeals, and visuals have just as much value in everyday-life presentations as they do in the public arena. Thus, we use a section on manuscript speaking (which we include despite its unpopularity among some public speaking instructors), to emphasize how this delivery form gives speakers a unique opportunity to experiment with and "choose appropriate and effective words" as well as powerful narratives and memorable visuals.

## Theory and Research

Given our careers at a research university and a community college, we decided that regardless of the institutional setting, the textbook must be professionally relevant and intellectually rigorous. We reviewed the leading public speaking textbooks and our findings confirmed Frobish's conclusion about the lack of contemporary theory and research. We believe that our textbook is both theory-rich and reader-friendly. For example, in our "Informative Speaking" chapter, we use Katherine Rowan's typology of informative strategies rather than offering the usual list of organizational patterns and informative speaking "tips." In our discussion of persuasion, we translate sophisticated persuasion theories into responsible, accessible, and usable explanations that help speakers choose effective persuasive strategies.

As a result of these three preliminary decisions, we believe that our textbook reflects Jamieson's concept of eloquence. We strongly emphasize narrative theory and the power of storytelling. Whereas most textbooks include narratives as a method for introducing a speech, we urge readers to enlist the power of stories in a variety of ways--as supporting material, as persuasive proof, as a means of enhancing speaker credibility and expressive delivery. We include a discussion of presentation/visual aids (as do most textbooks) but resist a focus on PowerPoint. Instead, we focus on the principles of visual design as well as how to match messages with appropriate media. Students may know how to use PowerPoint, but they rarely know how to apply the principles of visual communication to their presentations.

We faced a special challenge when our survey respondents emphasized the importance of choosing appropriate and effective words. Like most textbooks, we write about the nature of oral language and about using language that is culturally sensitive. We talk about choosing words that are concise, simple, and concrete, but also urge speakers to use vivid words, sensory appeals, and figures of speech. Yet, telling students what to do when choosing the words for a presentation is not the same as telling them how to do it.

What many textbooks fail to do is recognize their students' voices. Some of our students can be eloquent with simple, concrete words. Others have a talent for drama and emotion-laden language. We believe that any speaker can have eloquent moments, particularly when they are self-disclosive. We suggest that they think about their life experiences, about stories that inspire them, about quotations that move them, about examples that enlighten them. We urge them to share these experiences, stories, quotations, and examples sincerely--to speak from the heart. And, if they do so, an eloquent, charismatic moment can materialize.

As a group, public speaking textbook authors (and we include ourselves) have difficulty finding words about finding the words. Our discipline and students would be well served by more research and stronger theory-based pedagogy in this area. The Frobish article and Kathleen Jamieson's redefinition of eloquence in our electronic age have helped all of us reexamine our pedagogy with the hope of making our textbooks a better reflection of our discipline and its scholarship.